

## **I'm Sorry You Saw Me When I Lost My Way by peachykeen\_jb**

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**Summary:**

Joyce attends her high school reunion in 1971, '81, and '91. She isn't pleased about it.

# **I'm Sorry You Saw Me When I Lost My Way**

## **Author's Note:**

I'm not sure if we've been given the exact year of Joyce and Jim's high school graduation, but for my purposes they were in the same grade and graduated in 1961.

**1971**

Joyce Byers groaned as she turned off her car ignition and stared up at her old high school. A banner upfront read "Class of '61 Reunion". She couldn't believe she was going. Laura Chandler, one of her only friends from high school who she still talked to occasionally, was coming in from her home in Chicago and had begged Joyce to attend so they could catch up in-person. She'd reluctantly agreed, but now she regretted her decision more than ever. With a final sigh, she tightened her scarf and opened the car door to the chilly winter air.

Why they'd chosen January to hold the event, she'd never know. Hawkins was never a place people looked forward to visiting, but for the lucky bastards who'd gotten out, she was sure this was the least tempting time of year to come home. She struggled a bit getting out of her tiny car, being seven and a half months pregnant will do that to you, and she had to carefully steady herself on the icy cement before attempting to cross the snowy parking lot.

When Joyce finally made it to the doors of the gymnasium, she was instantly struck by a wave of nostalgia. How could the gym possibly smell the exact same way as it did ten years ago? She may have skipped a lot of gym classes back in the day, but she'd never forgotten the smell of polished linoleum and sweat. She stood by the entrance for a minute, taking it all in, before a voice called out to

her.

“Hi there! You want a name tag?”

She turned to her left and saw a pudgy young man smiling up at her from a table covered in nametags and sharpies. She racked her brain for a moment before she remembered his name was Bob, or ‘Bob the Brain’ as some of her other friends had called him. They ran in different crowds, but they’d had a few classes together.

“Joyce, right? It’s good to see ya!” he said, as she reached for a nametag, “Here, let me fill one out for you. It looks like bending down might be a little difficult for you.”

Bob chuckled as he gestured toward her stomach with a sharpie. She smiled politely and nodded,

“Thank you. It’s good to see you too, Bob.”

“There you go, easy peasy,” he replied, handing her the name tag which she stuck onto her cardigan. “There’s refreshments in the back, feel free to sit at whatever table you’d like. I think we’re supposed to have a band coming later too, but it looks like they’re late.”

“Cool, I’ll see you around.” Joyce said, giving him one last smile before turning away.

She carefully made her way around the perimeter of the room, searching for her friend Laura, while ignoring the looks from some of her other classmates who still lived in town. They were the ones who heard all the rumors about Lonnie Byers and his crazy wife. All the arguments, the screaming matches, the makeups. She tried to slip past a group of women who she recognized as former head cheerleader Jeanette Robinson and her friends Chrissy Carpenter and June Something-or-other, but she didn't go unnoticed. As she walked by she heard them guff at her, unconcerned that she was still within hearing range.

"I heard she hasn't even seen him since she found out about the baby."

"Do you think it's even his?"

"It has to be, who else would want to sleep with her?"

Joyce cringed, and was ready to admit defeat. She didn't belong here. She was about to give up on finding Laura and head back to her car when she saw him. He had his back turned, but she'd recognize that tall, intimidating form anywhere. Plus the cowlick of dirty blonde hair at the back of his head was a dead giveaway. She stood frozen, staring at his back and wondering if she had too much pride to let him see her like this. As if he could hear her thoughts, Jim Hopper suddenly turned around and caught her eye. A grin instantly spread across his face and he quickly walked over to her.

"Hey Horowitz, it's good to see ya," he said. She smiled a bit at her old nickname. They had always referred to each other with their surnames, ever since she decided that he didn't look like a "Jimmy" when they were thirteen years old. In high school, when everyone

started calling him Jim, she stuck with “Hop”.

“You’ve been gone for so long I guess you didn’t hear, it’s Byers now,” she answered.

He hummed in response, his brow furrowing for a moment before his easy smile returned,

“Well, I guess I’ll just have to call you Joyce from now on.”

She nodded at him, noting the way his clear blue eyes still sparkled the way they did when he was sixteen. Looking at him now, with his cheeky grin and mature features, it was hard for her to remember why they’d barely spoken in the last ten years. They’d shared an unlikely friendship, forged under the bleachers next to the football field between the middle school and high school, passing cigarettes back and forth. It had grown into a strong one, and even though they often ran in different groups, they somehow always ended up together when they needed someone to lean on. He was there when she needed a ride home from a party because she was too drunk, and she was there with an ice pack for his hand after he’d gotten in yet another fight.

It was Vietnam that had broken them in the end. They’d fought for months leading up to his departure, with her begging him not to fight in a pointless war, and him shouting back that there was nothing else for him so why shouldn’t he go? She wasn’t his girlfriend, but it felt like he was breaking her heart when he confirmed that he was leaving before the summer was over. They’d made up eventually, she couldn’t bear to let him go knowing he was angry at her, but before they could really fall back into their relaxed repertoire, he’d shipped off. In the ten years since, she’d learned to live without his

comforting presence.

“So how’ve you been, Hop?”

“I’m good, really good actually. I just made Detective, after doing the shitty grunt work for three years, but I really like the other guys on the force. I got married too,” he said, holding up his left hand for her to see the wedding band, “Her name’s Diane. She couldn’t make it tonight because she’s at home with the baby.”

As he said it, he couldn’t keep the smile from spreading across his face. He looked so proud and Joyce couldn’t stop herself from wondering if Lonnie ever looked like that when he spoke about Jonathan.

“You’ve got a kid?” she asked.

“Sure do! Her name is Sara, two months old and already the cutest kid you’ll ever see. No offense to the one you’ve got there with you now,” he said cheekily, giving her a wink as he gestured toward her baby bump.

“Wow Hop, that’s... that’s great. Really great. I’m so happy for you.”

And she was. The last thing she’d ever wish was for him to be unhappy. She’d read the news stories of other soldiers from Vietnam who weren’t nearly so lucky. It seemed like half of the ones who even made it home had something called shell shock, like the soldiers from World War I. But Hopper had made it, and here he was standing

taller than ever, clean-shaven, smiling, looking happier than she'd ever seen him.

"So where's Lonnie? He didn't let his pregnant wife show up to the reunion alone, did he?"

Joyce noticed the slight edge in his voice that seemed to come out of nowhere, but she knew better. Lonnie had always been a sore point between them. When Joyce had started dating him during their senior year, Hopper had made his feelings on the other boy very clear. 'He's a dick, Horowitz, he'll only hurt you'. But she hadn't listened. After dating on and off for years, they'd married when she found out she was pregnant the first time. Joyce had a feeling that Hop wouldn't be pleased to learn that not much had changed about Lonnie Byers.

"He wanted to be here, but he's at home watching Jonathon, our oldest. He's four. I said I'd stay but he insisted I get out of the house."

It was a lie. Jonathan was being watched by their neighbor Mrs. Gillespie tonight because she had no idea where her husband was. It had been three days since she'd seen him last. They were fighting over money, again, because Lonnie didn't seem to understand the importance of putting away extra savings for when the baby came.

Hopper narrowed his eyes but nodded anyway. "Right. Well, too bad, it would've been nice to catch up. Seems like he must've turned things around in these past ten years," he said, sounding like he didn't mean a word of it.

“Yeah, it’s definitely been... different.”

In that moment it was hard for her not to feel jealous. Jealous that Hopper had made it out of this town and was succeeding somewhere else, somewhere more exciting and glamorous, while she was still here and still with Lonnie. Sometimes she struggled with the fact that her life at twenty-eight wasn’t so different from her life at eighteen. She was still overworked, still had no free time, still with the same guy who acted like they really were still in high school. It didn’t seem fair that some of her classmates made it out while others like her didn’t get the opportunity. But then she remembered her son. No matter what else had happened in the past decade, Jonathan was worth it. He, and the new baby, were always going to be worth it.

Joyce didn’t realize she had zoned out until she heard Hopper clear his throat. She snapped out of her reverie and caught him searching her face, his brow furrowed.

“Are you analyzing me, detective?” she tried to joke. He didn’t smile this time, and continued to scrutinize her features.

“Are you sure you’re doing okay, Joyce?” he asked sincerely.

She forced herself to smile at him and took his hand, trying to reassure him. “I’m fine, Hop. Really. I’m just tired, that’s all. I’m ready for the baby to be out, and for the winter to end, that’s all.”

“I hope you know you can still call me if you need anything. It’s been a while but I still-”



"I appreciate it, but I'm okay. Don't worry about me. You've got a little daughter to worry about now," she said, hoping her smile distracted from the shakiness in her voice.

"I can't argue with that. We can tell she's going to be a handful already, she's pretty fussy. But then she'll look at me with those big blue eyes and I'm a goner. Diane's a little stronger than me, but not much," he chuckled, seeming to accept her reassurances.

"She sounds adorable. Listen, I better go find Laura, she'll kill me if we don't get to catch up," she said, trying to excuse herself.

"Oh sure, tell her I said hi."

She scoffed, "Right Hop, I'm sure she'd love to hear from you. She's totally forgotten about the time you and Chrissy did it in her parent's bedroom after the Spring Fling junior year."

"Oh come on, she can't still be mad about that!" he exclaimed as Joyce backed away smiling.

"I'll see you around, Hopper."

"Goodbye, Joyce."

She took one last glance at him before she turned away to weave through the crowded gym. As she searched for Laura, she tried to will her brain to remember him as he was now, so that someday (maybe) she'd be able to think of him and not picture the young teenagers they'd once been, with their futures wide open. Then (maybe) it wouldn't hurt so much to think of him at all.

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1981

It was 10:30 at night, and Joyce felt her head lolling as she listened to her tablemates chatter about who'd gained the most weight after twenty years. She regretted coming to her twentieth high school reunion as soon as she walked in the door, and the only thing getting her through was the fact that some genius from their student government had decided to make the event an open bar. After four glasses of white wine, she was just buzzy enough to join in the gossip and laugh with some old classmates she never spoke to outside of this room, but now that she was on her fifth glass all she wanted to do was crawl into her bed.

This time she'd attended the event with Karen Wheeler. Her little Will and Karen's son Mike had been friends for years now, and Joyce was almost at the point where she'd call Karen a friend as well. She wasn't going to go to the reunion at all, but Karen had practically begged her to go since Ted wasn't interested. She'd even offered to be the designated driver, and finally Joyce had agreed to attend. The whole car ride over Karen chattered about how she just couldn't believe that they were attending their twenty year reunion. Joyce had nodded her head in agreement, but secretly she felt old enough to be attending a forty year reunion at this point.

“I think we’ve seen just about everybody at this point”, said Karen’s old friend Jackie, interrupting Joyce’s thoughts. The tanned, curly-haired woman was sitting across from Joyce, chugging down her own fifth glass of wine, “Can you think of anyone in town that hasn’t come by?”

“Besides Ted,” Karen muttered under her breath. The other women rolled their eyes as Joyce patted her shoulder affectionately.

“What about Jim?” piped up the bespectacled woman to Karen’s left, Peggy, “He can’t possibly be too busy at the station, there’s never anything to do there.”

Joyce’s head snapped up at the use of his name.

“Something tells me he won’t be showing his face around here,” said Jackie bitterly, “Not after he’s screwed half the available women in this town. If he hasn’t made it through every willing member of this class yet, he’s definitely been with their sisters, and no one wants to hear that kind of drama tonight.”

Joyce knew what his reputation was like now, but her heart still tightened when she thought of Jim Hopper. In the two years since he’d been back in town, she’d only come across him a handful of times. A few weeks after his return, she’d left several voicemails on his answering machine, but he never responded and eventually she gave up. She realized he didn’t want to talk to her, and she was too busy working and raising her boys to try to repair an old friendship anyway. It stung at first, but she assumed he didn’t want to be reminded of his former life, didn’t want to get close to anyone

anymore. She couldn't blame him, that's exactly how she would feel if she lost one of her sons. The full extent of the pain was unimaginable to her, thank god, and because of that she didn't push him.

Now she'd see him on patrol occasionally, or getting into his car as she drove by the police station. He'd only come into Melvald's twice (when the larger chain grocery store was closed), and even then he was in-and-out in a flash, barely saying hello to her.

"If the reunion was held at a bar, he'd be here," Jackie was saying, rolling her eyes dramatically.

"Cut him some slack, Jackie, he lost his daughter and divorced his wife all in a year. A man can only take so much," Karen said, clucking her tongue at her friend.

"Yeah well, he sure seems to be over it. Everyone knows he's a sleazy womanizer now, I don't know why girls keep agreeing to go home with him. What does that say about the sorry state of women in this town?"

"I don't know, I mean he may not be as young or fit as he used to be, but he's still a looker. I wouldn't turn him away, even with the reputation," replied Peggy, blushing as she pushed her glasses up on her nose.

Joyce suddenly felt very antsy, like walls of this old building were going to fall in on her. Maybe she just wasn't used to Girl Talk anymore, or maybe it was because of the subject matter, but Joyce

knew she had to get away from the group.

“I’m going to have a quick cigarette before we go, I’ll meet you outside,” she said to Karen, who just nodded and waved her hand. Joyce swayed a bit as she stood up from the table, but managed to walk to the door without tripping in her heels. Her alcohol tolerance wasn’t nearly as high as it was back in high school, since her schedule as a single mom left her with little leisure time. As she walked outside into the crisp night air, she let the silence calm her. She heard the front doors shut, followed by another unexpected sound.

“Joyce?”

She whipped around, her unlit cigarette hanging from her lips, and saw Hopper leaning against the brick wall next to the doors.

“Hop?” she questioned, even though she knew it was him. “Were your ears burning?”

He pushed away from the wall and approached her. Being this close to him for the first time in years caused Joyce to notice how different he looked. He had a beard now, and his old carefree way of standing was gone, replaced with hunched shoulders and a guarded expression. What she noticed most of all though, were his eyes. His eyes were different. Now they were dulled, hazy, and pained, and there were dark purple circles under them.

“What are you doing out here? I haven’t seen you inside all night!” she followed up, after he ignored her first quip.

He looked away from her questioning gaze, and instead glanced up at the cloudy night sky, scratching his beard idly.

“I had no plans to be here at all, but Flo was bugging me about it today at the station, and I knew she’d find out if I wasn’t at least spotted in the vicinity tonight. Then I’d never hear the end of it.”

“Oh. Well people were wondering where you were. We missed you.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Okay, well, I missed you. You know there’s not exactly a lot of people from high school that I want to see anymore.” She knew it was bold, especially since they hadn’t been close friends in almost twenty years now, but the five glasses of wine in her system were making her feel risky.

“I’m not exactly good company anymore, Joyce.”

“Yeah I’ve heard,” she murmured, “You could’ve come over, Hop. You still had a friend in this town.”

He sighed, removing his hat and running his hand through his hair.

“Listen, I really don’t want to do this now. I can’t do this now. Just...

drop it, okay?"

"I'm just saying, even if you don't want to talk tonight, my door's always open. I know what it's like to feel lonel-

"Joyce," he growled, cutting her off.

Her mouth snapped shut, and she looked away from his pained expression. She suddenly felt antsy again, and her hands fidgeted for her forgotten cigarette. As she placed the stick between her lips, she struggled with her lighter, trying not to be distracted by his looming presence. Suddenly a large hand plucked the lighter from her shaking grasp. She looked up at him as he lit her cigarette, not realizing he had moved so close to her. He kept his eyes on the cigarette, and stepped back only slightly when it lit up. Joyce closed her eyes as she breathed in, letting the nicotine sooth her randomly frayed nerves. As the distinctive smell drifted up her nostrils, she was transported back in time to this same spot twenty years ago.

They were supposed to be in trigonometry but they were outside enjoying the fall air instead, him in his roughed up leather jacket and worn jeans, her sporting her brightest red lipstick that the teachers rolled their eyes at. They talked about everything and nothing as they passed the cigarette back and forth. Jim and Joyce, Hopper and Horowitz, always in trouble at school for something the administrators didn't approve of. They'd take turns buying packs of cigarettes or sneaking them from their parents. Joyce always complained when he showed up with a pack of Camels. He'd just grin and tell her she could handle it.

When she opened her eyes, Hopper was still there in front of her, but it was the new, sorrowful Hopper that she didn't really know

anymore. She gestured with the hand holding the cigarette, offering him a drag, and he took it, breathing deeply before handing it back to her. The action made her feel so nostalgic she wanted to cry. This version of Hopper was so far removed from her memory of him that it was hard to reconcile that he was the same person unless she closed her eyes. He was broken, in 1981, but she was too. A failed, volatile marriage will do that to a person.

Abruptly she felt the familiar twinge of claustrophobia setting in, even though she was outside. Joyce dropped the cigarette and stamped it out, shaking her head slightly. She was going to find Karen, she needed to be away from Jim and all their shared history and tragedies.

“I’m sorry, I need to-”

His hand was suddenly on her waist. Not gripping, not threatening, but heavy enough for her to gasp lightly and catch his eye.

“Don’t go,” he whispered. She could smell the alcohol on his breath, but then again he could probably smell it on her too. Before she knew it, his lips were on hers and she was responding before she even consciously processed it. She moaned and parted her lips, allowing him deeper access. His tongue swept over her teeth, exploring every inch of her mouth, and then she pulled back slightly to tug at his lower lip. He groaned and suddenly she was being lifted in the air. She wrapped her legs around his middle as he turned and walked a few steps so that her back was to the wall of the school.

The kisses were messy, but Joyce couldn’t help the pleased sounds emitting from her as he ravaged her lips. They pulled apart for a second to catch their breath before he bent down and began kissing



along her jaw. He quickly moved down to her neck, peppering love bites along the way, and sucking on a sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder. She gripped the back of his head, running her hands through the soft hair there, and pulling him closer to her body. Then Joyce felt a hand snake up from beneath the hem of her shirt, and she gasped at the sensation of his large, calloused hand squeezing her breast. As he switched to massage the other breast, his mouth returned to hers and they shared another messy, open-mouthed kiss.

It was then that they heard the gymnasium doors open beside them. He unceremoniously dropped her to the ground, the feel of her feet hitting the pavement jolting her back to reality, as Karen gasped at the site of them.

“Oh- I’m sorry- oh my god,” Karen stuttered, a hand flying to her mouth to cover her shocked smile.

Joyce could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks as Karen looked between the two of them, wide-eyed. Hopper was now standing a respectable distance away, rubbing the back of his neck and looking anywhere but at Joyce. After a pregnant pause, Karen smirked,

“I always knew there was something between the two of you, how-”

“Karen,” Joyce snapped, “Let’s go home. Now.”

Karen threw up her hands in defense, and started walking in the direction of her car. She threw a pointed look over her shoulder at Joyce, who ignored her and glanced at Hopper one more time. His

usual gruff expression was back in place, but she could see the pain in his eyes once more. She sighed, shaking her head as she turned to walk away. She had two amazing boys at home, and he was everything they didn't need right now.

"You know where to find me if you want someone to talk to, Hop" she said, glancing back at him as she followed Karen into the dark parking lot. She was unable to stop herself from at least offering him a non-judging ear if he needed it. It was something she wished someone had offered her back when Lonnie first left her.

"Same goes for you," he replied to her back as she faded away.

She wouldn't really need him for another two years.

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**1991**

"I can't believe I'm going to this," Joyce groaned, "I haven't wanted to go to a single one, and yet somehow I've ended up at every reunion they've thrown."

Jim Hopper wrapped an arm around his wife as they walked to the doors of their (and their kids') old high school. He grinned as he looked down at her,

“I know, but I really wanted to show the whole class that I have the hottest wife thirty years later.”

As he said it, he casually slipped his arm down from her shoulder to squeeze her butt. She jumped and swatted him as he laughed.

“You’re an animal,” she said with an eye roll.

“And you love it.”

If their kids were here they would all be groaning in disgust at this point. They always did whenever Joyce and Hopper shared even a chaste kiss in the kitchen. Even the comical thought of her kids’ disgusted faces made Joyce’s heart twinge a little. She missed them. Jonathan was in NYC, happily working as a freelance photographer for some magazine she’d never heard of, and living in a small apartment with Nancy. Will and Jane were at college, and although they both called regularly, it wasn’t the same as having her home filled with them and their friends playing D&D or watching movies until 3 am.

But she wasn’t really alone. Their kids may be off in the world, and as hard as it was for Joyce to deal with that, she still had her tough, grouchy, secretly-doting husband. She and Jim would be celebrating their five-year wedding anniversary soon, and it was guaranteed to be a much more enjoyable celebration than the anniversary event they were currently heading to. All she needed was her small, mended family to be happy. When they had first gotten together (after that horrible year where they almost lost both Will and Jane), the town hadn’t been quiet or kind with their gossip.

“I can’t believe she’s shacking up with someone new so soon.”

“What could he possibly see in her?”

“She’s asking for it if she thinks she’ll get a happy ending with that guy.”

“He’s a mess.”

“She’s crazy.”

But they didn’t let it get to them. Even when she and Jim were at their lowest points individually, caring about what the rest of the town thought of them was never at the forefront of their minds. Since they’d gotten together, the only opinions they cared about were each others’ and their children’s. All it took was one dinner date and a private evening spent at his old trailer (away from the kids’ prying eyes) to know that she never wanted to be away from him again. When he and Jane officially moved into her house, it was like they had lived there the whole time. When he finally popped the question, they both agreed it was just a formality. She was his and he was hers until death do they part, from the moment they donned matching hazmat suits and walked straight into Hell together. A ring and a certificate didn’t change that. Sometimes a family is a battered police chief, his “illegitimate” daughter, a habitual single mom and her two weird boys.

“Joyce?”

Her husband's voice brought her back to the present, and her chocolate eyes flashed to meet his icy blue ones as they paused outside the gym doors.

"Sorry, I was just... reminiscing."

He quirked an eyebrow and glanced at the brick wall they were standing next to, "About the last time we were in this exact same spot?"

"No," she shot back, "but now that you mention it..."

She was a little surprised that he brought up the tryst from their twentieth reunion, considering he hadn't been in the best place back then with the death of Sara still fresh on his mind. But she shouldn't be shocked by the mention. This was how they worked now. Trauma will always be trauma, but the burden is lifted a little when it's shared. They talked about everything now. Joyce supposed they had the kids to thank for the golden rules of "no secrets" and "friends don't lie". Jim finally got to a place where he could talk about Sara, to Joyce and Jane only, but still it was progress. Being able to share happy memories of his first-born allowed him to better handle the darker memories as well.

Joyce ran her fingers up and down his chest for a moment, smiling a little at the quiet groan he let out. She stood on her tiptoes and reached up to place a hand at the back of his neck, pulling him down so she could place a soft kiss on his lips. Before he could deepen it, and Joyce could tell that he wanted to, she pulled away.

"You're a tease," he said, the smile on his face betraying his purposed frustration as he looked down at her.

"Maybe so, but since we're here we might as well go in."

He groaned, "Fine, but now I'm thinking you were right all along. We should've stayed home and had our own private reunion. It would've been a lot more fun, and I wouldn't have to wear a tie."

"Well, you're not the only one who wants to show off your spouse. Maybe I want to rub it in our classmates' faces that Crazy Joyce isn't alone this time," she said, sticking her tongue out at him. She hoped her quip sounded nonchalant, even though the familiar feeling of uneasiness was creeping in. Jim just chuckled and grabbed her hand, pulling her towards the door. Just before he pushed it open, he stopped once more and looked at her seriously for a moment.

"You aren't alone, and I promise you'll never be alone again."

Joyce felt the prickle of tears in her eyes at his statement. He seemed to know exactly how to comfort her when she was feeling anxious. He'd always been good at that, even when they were just friends. She squeezed his hand in return.

"I know," she whispered.

She wasn't broken this time, and neither was he. It may have taken 30 years, but they had each other now and they were stronger

together than they ever were alone. They still had their share of scars but they were faded now, healed as much as possible through love and time. Joyce knew that whatever obstacles lay ahead of them, they'd handle it together. Whether it was facing snide comments from former classmates or other-dimensional demons, there was no one she'd rather stand with. With that, she gripped her husband's hand and pushed through the doors of Hawkins High School. She was ready to give 'em hell.